

Richard Rodger & Joanna Herbert (eds.), *Testimonies of the City: Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2007. ISBN 0754655601

This volume gathers together 11 studies at the interface of urban history and oral history, based on the papers presented at a panel on oral and urban history at the Seventh International Conference on Urban History, held in 2004. The introduction, by editors Rodger and Herbert, identifies the goal of the collection “...to illuminate the insights that oral testimonies can offer to the urban historian.”¹ Within the introduction, the editors spend considerable time rehearsing well-worn debates about the reliability and insights offered by oral sources; this caution suggests that urban historians know little about, and are deeply suspicious of, oral history. Regardless, the works gathered together here cover a wide variety of methodological and geographical positions. Ranging from Scotland to Sao Paulo, and from Bucharest to Los Angeles via Zagreb and Paris, *Testimonies of the City* provides a window into the kinds of projects being undertaken across the globe, and gives Anglophone scholars access to research that might otherwise be linguistically inaccessible.

The volume is split into four themed sections: Social Identities; Community, Neighbourhood and Daily Life; Responses to Urban Change; and Migration and Methods. The first section works at the level of defined social groups, placing them within their particular cities and exploring their experience. Johnston and McIvor’s “Narratives from the urban workplace” and Tóth’s “The cultural identity of semi-skilled women workers in Socialist Hungary” are similar, oral history-based projects, presenting the stories of former workers from the Clydeside shipyards in Scotland and a Budapest hosiery factory respectively. As is the case with most of the chapters, both these studies give considerable attention to the methodological detail of their projects, ensuring that the reader is aware of how the researchers engaged with their respondents and interpreted the testimony they received. Horváth’s chapter, “Myths of the Great Tree Gang”, is a very different kind of study. Where the previous two chapters were based on interviews conducted specifically for recent

research, Horváth uses archival materials, including television programs and police interviews, to investigate moral panics around unconventional youth behaviour in Budapest. The juxtaposition of two articles about Budapest, both paying particular attention to the late 1960s, is very effective. The impact of each is heightened by exposing very different reactions to the socialist behavioural norms operating in the city.

The second section, “Community, Neighbourhood and Daily Life”, deals with three very different urban settings, exploring different kinds of links between individuals in the urban fabric. Zrnić’s “Meanings of the city” juxtaposes anti-modernist critiques of New Zagreb’s vast housing developments with the fondness that residents feel for their homes, and the sense of community they created there. Beyers’ “Unfolding Urban memories and ethnic identities” explores racist narratives and changing ideas of community in Flanders’ small coal-mining towns. Varlet’s “Rhythms, rituals and routines in inter-war Paris” gives a sense of the basic activities that structured the experience of “ordinary people” and “the banality of ordinary life”.² These studies deal with much larger groups than those in the preceding section, but they are still drawing on oral testimony as the basis for learning about the shared experience of life in each of these cities.

The third section, “Responses to Urban Change”, shifts away from everyday life to look at change. In Popa’s “Understanding the urban past”, architects and urban planners narrate their role in the reconstruction of Bucharest under the Caeușescu regime, undermining the perception that the dictator was solely responsible. Pereira’s chapter, “Resurrecting narratives”, explores memories and meanings of the partially reconstructed Brás district of Sao Paolo, engaging with both the former working class and more recent middle class residents. The primary object of Wallach’s chapter, “Uncommon threads”, is public art practices in Los Angeles. Here the relationship to oral history is as a source for the artist in creating works about the history of communities and spaces in the city. Along with Horváth’s work on youth culture in Budapest, this piece is different to the other work in the collection, which combine oral and urban history in more conventional ways. In Horváth and Wallach’s work the oral sources are not the focus. Their inclusion suggests that the editors wanted to present a wide range of ways in which the oral and the urban can interact

in historical studies. Despite this important role, these two chapters feel somewhat out of place in the volume.

The final section, “Migration and Methods”, presents two methodological studies. Fischer’s “Migrant voices in the contemporary history of Vienna” presents the political and historiographical context for the work, before moving through the recruiting and interview techniques employed. Herbert’s “Negotiating Boundaries”, on the other hand, deals primarily with the ethical dilemmas of being a younger white woman interviewing members of the South Asian community in Leicester, UK. In both these essays, the authors carefully work their way through the processes and problematics of doing oral history, building on the methodological material presented throughout the volume. Their inclusion serves to highlight the importance of these considerations in working with oral sources, and Fischer, in particular, extends strong arguments for their importance in urban history.

Testimonies of the City is part of the Historical Urban Studies series, which has published titles dealing with a wide range of periods and approaches, but has never emphasised personal sources. It is perhaps for that reason that the introductory essay spends so long developing an argument for the legitimacy of oral history. In the Australian context, in which Janet McCalman’s *Struggletown* (first published 1984) makes such powerful use of oral testimony, and is one of the nation’s most famous and influential urban histories, this seems unnecessary.³ Perhaps it is a reflection of the segmentation of the discipline that the work of scholars such as Steven High or Tim Minchin who write about deindustrialisation and its impact on communities in North America, and draw upon oral testimony for much of their work, are positioned as labour historians rather than working in urban history.⁴

This collection provides a stimulating snapshot of ways that researchers around the world are combining the study of urban life and oral testimony. Given the breadth of work presented, it is something of a shame that the introductory essay felt the need to provide such a simple primer in oral history theory, rather than the complexities of relating an individual’s testimony to the history of urban places. Nevertheless, if this book is the start of a broader engagement between these two kinds of history then I for one will be glad.

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¹ Richard Rodgers and Joanna Herbert, "Frameworks: Testimony, Representation and Interpretation" in Richard Rodgers and Joanna Herbert (eds.), *Testimonies of the City: Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World*, Ashgate, Aldershot, p. 3.

² Caroline Varlet, "Rhythms, rituals and routines in inter-war Paris: a sensitive experience of urban history", in Rodgers and Joanna Herbert (eds.), *Testimonies of the City: Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World*, Ashgate, Aldershot, p. 139.

³ Janet McCalman, *Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond 1900-1965*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1984.

⁴ See Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003; Tim Minchin, "'Just Like a Death': The Closing of the International Paper Company Mill in Mobile, Alabama, and the Deindustrialization of the South, 2000-2005", in *Alabama Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 44-77.